

## 5 Ways to Practice Happiness



When it comes to the quest for greater happiness, waiting and hoping are out. Learning and practicing are in. Here's how to create your own happy reality - starting now.

## Getting Past Glum

### A Look on the Bright Side

1. Your mental game matters, so shift your thinking
2. Don't count on more money to make you happier.
3. Apply yourself fully to whatever you do.
4. Embrace virtues, and enjoy their rewards.
5. Focus on relationships and cultivate community.

### More Than a Feeling

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We travel in search of it, marry for the sake of it, see coaches and therapists to enhance it, switch jobs to capture it, and sock away money to secure it. Yet, for many of us, happiness remains elusive. And even though we spend much of our lives chasing happiness, many of us would be hard-pressed to even define it in the first place.

So what is happiness? Where can we find it? And once we do, how can we keep it?

These are questions that have consumed philosophers, spiritual leaders and artists (to say nothing of folks like you and me) for thousands of years. In the past decade, though, the same questions have attracted the attention of a growing number of psychologists, neurologists, and other respected academics and clinicians.

These researchers are turning their attention toward the mechanics and chemistry of happiness, which they define (in simplified terms) as the emotional experience of having a pleasant, engaged and meaningful life. And their findings are having a dramatic impact not just on the field of psychology, but also on the way many of us are cultivating happiness in our own lives.

At first glance, the notion of investigating happiness may not seem particularly revolutionary. But, in fact, the new interest in happiness represents a relatively contemporary shift in psychological focus. Historically, it seems that psychology has been more interested in fixing mental-health problems and illnesses than boosting actual happiness. And so the problems got more than their fair share of attention.

## Getting Past Glum

“Sigmund Freud famously suggested that the goal of psychoanalysis is to make extraordinarily unhappy people ‘ordinarily’ unhappy,” says Darrin McMahon, PhD, a professor of history at Florida State University in Tallahassee and the author of *Happiness: A History* (Grove, 2006). In short, psychology tried to make life tolerable for people suffering from severe mental illness.

Yet today most psychologists don't treat the severely mentally ill. Instead they primarily work with people who are dealing with everyday dissatisfactions and worries, and the classic “talking cure,” meant to remedy acute mental illness, remains stuck in the same old Freudian paradigm.

“As a clinician, I treated people with depression and anxiety,” explains Andrew Shatté, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and coauthor of *The Resilience Factor: Seven Keys to Finding Your Inner Strength and Overcoming Life's Hurdles* (Broadway, 2002). “The way that we defined success was that people would come

in and we measured their symptoms: If they had 30 symptoms and we got them to five, we called it a success. If we got it down to zero, we said ‘mission accomplished.’” In other words, helping clients build more happiness into their lives wasn’t part of the picture.

But if plumbing the mind’s recesses and dredging up past miseries doesn’t necessarily promote happiness, what can it hurt? Perhaps a lot, says Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, Calif., a prominent figure in the study of happiness, and the author of numerous books, including *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper Perennial, 1991). “Most people, when they ruminate about the cause of their wretchedness, become more wretched,” he says. “For most people, that’s just compounding their misery.”

### A Look on the Bright Side

Shatté and Csikszentmihalyi are just two of a growing number of psychologists who, as part of what’s known as the Positive Psychology movement, have shifted their attention to advancing the knowledge of what makes us feel satisfied, energized, hopeful — and happy.

What they’ve discovered is that while overall life satisfaction does have an innate component (some people are just born happier and are wired to stay that way), happiness is also something we can practice and cultivate.

Happiness hinges on our choices, attitudes and thoughts — and when we know more about how these choices, attitudes and thoughts affect the quality of our lives, we have a powerful recipe for cooking up more lifelong joy, meaning and satisfaction.

Below are five of the fundamental conclusions from “happiness studies” done in recent years. Many of them sound like commonsense realizations — principles you’d think that we’d all be acting on already. But when it comes to creating our own happiness, turning common sense into common practice is a step most of us have yet to make.

#### 1. Your mental game matters, so shift your thinking.

Studies suggest that each of us has a baseline for happiness. Positive and negative events — winning the lottery or suffering a spinal cord injury are two examples that researchers have studied — will knock us off our baseline. But over time, we tend to return to roughly the same level of happiness, whether we are millionaires or confined to a wheelchair.

Where this baseline is set involves our temperament and genetics as well as our fundamental belief systems and thinking styles, explains Shatté. “The thing about our belief systems is that they become habits of thinking,” he explains, “and often these thinking styles are inaccurate.”

To illustrate the point, Shatté describes an experiment he frequently performs at seminars. He flashes a series of “word jumbles” on a screen and gives attendees 12 seconds to solve each puzzle. What he doesn’t tell them is that none of the puzzles has a solution. After several minutes, he pauses the exercise to ask participants to chart their feelings about their failure — frustration, anger, embarrassment.

“Each specific kind of feeling results from habits of thinking,” he explains. “If you think you’re not as good as other people, you’re going to be sad; if you are looking for a violation of your rights, you’ll be angry; if you think you will lose standing, you’re embarrassed. The

point is, every one of these thoughts was wildly inaccurate, given the truth that the puzzles are unsolvable. We make mistakes in our thinking and we pay a price for them.”

The takeaway? People who gain self-knowledge about their inaccurate beliefs and feelings, Shatté says, can permanently lift their baseline for happiness. The more you understand your thinking style and beliefs, the more you are able to see the inaccuracies for what they are and be less affected by them.

Happiness Practice: Pay attention to your instinctive emotional responses and begin consciously challenging the negative thoughts and limiting belief systems that underlie them. Develop a self-calming or hopeful mental mantra (“Everything is an opportunity.” “I get to choose my responses.” “This, too, shall pass.”) to get you through anxiety-ridden moments.

## 2. Don't count on more money to make you happier.

The relationship between money and happiness is a complicated one. Some studies show that living in a wealthier nation can increase your happiness, regardless of your income level, but that within those countries, the rich report only marginally higher levels of happiness. Other studies suggest even the poorest people of the world, like those who live in the slums of Calcutta, can achieve happiness.

How to explain these discrepancies? Well, it turns out that basic needs like food and warmth generally must be secured as a precursor to happiness. To that end, money helps. And another ingredient of lasting happiness is pleasure, which can also be bought. But pleasure by itself, untethered from meaning and purpose, doesn't stay pleasurable — or promote happiness — for very long.

Research shows factors such as meaningful relationships with family and friends and a sense of duty and purpose outside ourselves are equally important in determining overall happiness. Lacking those things, no amount of money is going to up your happiness quotient.

In fact, focusing on money to the detriment of things like relationships, duty and purpose is a proven recipe for unhappiness. Study after study shows that the more stock you put in what psychologist Tim Kasser, PhD, calls “extrinsic” values like status, possessions or good looks, the more unhappy you are. It turns out that materialism — a preoccupation with material goods at the expense of other cultural, social and spiritual values — is a highly reliable way to drive your happiness downward.

Kasser, a psychologist at Knox College in Galesburg, Ill., and the author of *The High Price of Materialism* (The MIT Press, 2002), considers well-being to depend on the fulfillment of four psychological needs: safety and security, competence, connection to other people, and autonomy or freedom.

“Our research shows that when people have strong materialistic values, they tend to feel low satisfaction of those needs,” he says. “Fundamentally, they've hinged their sense of worth on what others think of them, so their [happiness] is always fragile and contingent.”

The key to sustained happiness, it seems, is finding a balance between pleasure and meaning — and knowing when enough material wealth is enough.

Happiness Practice: If you're compromising your close relationships, authentic priorities or sense of inner purpose in the pursuit of material wealth, it's time to refocus your energy. Make a list of your core values and the experiences that matter most to you, then start building more of them into your schedule and budget, even if it means making some financial sacrifices in other areas. Seeking meaning, and finding ways to be generous with your time, care and money, will bring you far more happiness than a pile of greenbacks.

3. Apply yourself fully to whatever you do.

If only you could take early retirement and spend the rest of your days in a hammock sipping margaritas — then you'd be happy! Don't count on it.

One of the crucial ingredients of a happy life is what Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow."

If you've ever been so absorbed in an activity that you've lost track of time, you've probably experienced flow for yourself.

"It's when you are completely involved in something that stretches you and forces you to use your skills. You're so focused you don't even know you exist," Csikszentmihalyi explains. You're not thinking that you're happy at the time, he continues, "because being happy would distract you from what you're doing. But after you finish, you look back on it and wish you could stay in it forever."

Here's one of Csikszentmihalyi's most surprising research discoveries: The actual task doesn't matter. He's studied factory workers and fishmongers who take routine jobs and "turn them into a work of art," he says. A person can cultivate flow whether organizing paint cans in the basement or preparing a seminal speech for a big client at work. Entering a state of flow requires no more than presence, a problem-solving attitude and the conviction that you are going to do the best job you can at the task at hand.

To get lost in your next undertaking, says Csikszentmihalyi, shift your mindset. "Instead of approaching [it] with the attitude 'here's another stupid thing I have to do,' say, 'I'm going to do it as well as possible.'" When you've found your groove, you'll have found more genuine happiness.

Happiness Practice: Regularly stretch your skills and abilities and be willing to give your full attention and intelligence to whatever you're working on (or playing at) at the moment. Seek opportunities to develop mastery in various areas of your life (for ideas, see "The Skillful Life" in the June 2008 archives), and begin swapping passive "sit around" entertainments for active, meaningful, challenging ones that allow you to apply your skills and to experience "flow" on a regular basis.

4. Embrace virtues, and enjoy their rewards.

One of the most profound — and profoundly simple — tenets of positive psychology is that happiness is found not only through individual thoughts and behaviors, but also by connecting to a wider purpose and contributing to the well-being of others.

This idea has been with us for a long time, says history professor McMahon. "Before the 18th century, 'happiness' was not predominately a description of a feeling or an emotional state, but a description of a virtuous life," he says. "When people began to think of

happiness as a positive emotion and good feeling, it was a profound shift.” Today, positive psychology has rediscovered the value of “virtues” using the scientific method, he says.

Psychologists are still exploring the territory, according to Csikszentmihalyi, but new and emerging studies show that when a person feels gratitude, forgiveness or another classical virtue, she reports higher levels of happiness and satisfaction.

These studies seem to indicate that happiness is tied not just to living for yourself, but trying to do something for others.

One study, for example, found that senior citizens who tried to live out their faith in everyday life reported higher levels of happiness than seniors who simply went to church to socialize. Shatté’s studies in the workplace corroborate the findings: Those who are happiest feel they’re contributing to something important.

“We’ve compared people who make a million dollars a year to people making a tenth of that amount in the public sector,” says Shatté. The public sector employees who believe they’re “contributing to the greater good” were, Shatté says, “more satisfied than anyone.”

**Happiness Practice:** Make a point of doing considerate, loving and generous things for others (“random acts of kindness”) daily. Seize every opportunity to do the right thing and to express gratitude for kindnesses you receive. Get involved with at least one organized cause that inspires you to share not just your money, but at least a little face-to-face time and effort. If you’re looking for meaningful ways to get involved, check out Web sites like [www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org) and [www.volunteermatch.com](http://www.volunteermatch.com) to connect with organizations that might need your expertise.

## 5. Focus on relationships and cultivate community.

Ed Diener, PhD, a psychologist at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and one of the nation’s foremost happiness researchers, has conducted countless studies on the variables that contribute to happiness. His lab has explored many different cultures, including African tribes, the Amish and Calcutta slum-dwellers, as well as more prosaic groups, like American college students.

What do the happiest people have in common? Positive social relationships. Happy people cultivate friendships and tend to be married or in relationships.

Surprisingly, it isn’t necessarily the quality or the quantity of friendships that matter. One study of college students found that the happiest of them had a “best friend,” but that companionship — just hanging out together — was more important to their happiness than making deeper connections.

**Happiness Practice:** Make some time every day to connect with the important people in your life. Establish some weekly or other regular rituals that give you opportunities to interact with others in meaningful ways.

Not sure where to start? Form a happiness-seekers circle with some friends, and meet monthly to compare notes on the practices that are working best for you. Try a different practice each month, and by this winter you might just find that cultivating happiness is fast becoming your hobby of choice.

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## More Than a Feeling

The field of Positive Psychology has made it clear that enhancing happiness is not about turning your frown upside down or ignoring life's disappointments. And it's not about trying to feel happy when you don't. Rather, it's about taking daily actions that shift some of your core behaviors and attitudes over time. Here are three simple places you can start:

**Develop Your Strengths:** Each of us has a set of core strengths that can serve as a foundation for building happiness in life. By identifying and claiming your strengths (as opposed to just obsessing about your wants and weaknesses), you'll experience more success and satisfaction in bringing them to bear on your work, activities and relationships. To get started, you can take a free, detailed 20-minute test called the VIA Inventory of Signature Strengths at [www.viasurvey.org](http://www.viasurvey.org).

**Scale Back on Stuff:** Mountains of material goods do not equal happiness. Look for ways to reduce your acquisition of material possessions and to declutter and donate the excess stuff you've accumulated so far. On his anniversary, psychologist Tim Kasser, PhD, writes a poem for his wife instead of buying her things she doesn't want or need. "It's zero consumption and it's a direct expression of our love." His suggestion: When you're about to make a purchase, take the time to consider if it's necessary and consistent with your values.

**Start Asking Questions:** Challenging our own assumptions (most of which are embedded with judgments, fears and negative beliefs) is a powerful way to begin experiencing more of the happiness that's there for the taking.

## Resources

Here are a few books and Web sites that will help you learn more about how to build greater happiness into your life.

### BOOKS

**Happier: Learn the Secrets to Daily Joy and Lasting Fulfillment** by Tal Ben-Shahar (McGraw-Hill, 2007)

**Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment** by Martin Seligman (Free Press, 2002)

**The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom** by Jonathan Haidt (Basic Books, 2006)

### WEB

[www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu) — The Authentic Happiness homepage includes self-assessments and resources for testing and improving the qualities that help foster happiness.

[www.pos-psych.com](http://www.pos-psych.com) — Positive Psychology News Daily is a news feed of articles about positive psychology and happiness authored by guest authors and graduates of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania.

[www.psych.uiuc.edu/~ediener](http://www.psych.uiuc.edu/~ediener) — Ed Diener is one of the leading experts in happiness, maintaining an extensive Web site with a detailed FAQ and catalog of research.